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The notion of 'constellative thinking' in Pacific thought: Expanding Oceania.

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Abstract

The current paper is a contribution to an ongoing discussion that stemmed from a seminal paper titled "Our Sea of Islands", by the late Epeli Hau'ofa, Professor of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific. The paper aims to further the objectives of "Our Sea of Islands" by reframing its arguments using the vocabulary of a school of thought that can be traced from Immanuel Kant to Theodor Adorno, via Hegel. The aim is to see if we, as people of Oceania, can arrive at a more appropriate articulation of ourselves using the grammar embedded within Western philosophical discourse. Ultimately the paper aims at reanimating a renaissance of Oceanic thinking, given "Our Sea of Islands".

Keywords: constellative thinking, Pacific Studies, non-identity, Hau'ofa, Oceania.

The notion of 'constellative thinking' in Pacific thought: Expanding Oceania

This paper stems from a long-held desire to revisit one of the most enduring literary vistas of my undergraduate days, which helped shape an emerging consciousness to critically engage with some of the most important issues of the time in the undeveloped or underdeveloped world¹. These were issues of poverty, powerlessness, belittlement, exploitation, and patterns of regressive development: matters that are still as pertinent now as they were then. It became almost a truism, as if following an immutable law, to predict your fortunes collectively as a people by looking at the geographical space you occupy on the globe. An indelible memory from those formative years is how this new vista, based on a re-examination of our region and its people, saved me from the usual dose of melancholy that pervades the corridors of higher learning in Oceania. I am referring of course to the late Epeli Hau'ofa's seminal article, popularly known as "Our Sea of Islands" (Hau'ofa, 1993).²

The current paper is a contribution to an ongoing discussion that had been taking place until discourse on Oceania was reconceptualised by Professor Hau'ofa nearly twenty years ago³. His work had the effect of loosening the ties of this scholarship from its colonial moorings and, in turn, clearing a space for an alternative discourse that could be more faithful to our ways of *knowing* and *being*. Since then the dialogue has been a consistent part of discourse

¹ These categorical definitions are tossed about depending on one's particular position on the ideological divide at the time. Today the term 'Developing World' is used to cover those countries that were formerly grouped under those categories.

² The gist of Hau'ofa's argument can be traced back to Edward Said's '*Orientalism*'.

³ This is not to ignore the works of people such as Albert Wendt, but to make the point that these works are exceptions to the rule and far in between.

in the region but, alas, not exactly in the form that Hau'ofa had in mind. This, in my view, is largely due to the native imageries that Professor Hau'ofa used to sublimely underscore his points – imageries whose symbolic potency does not sit well with hegemonic development ideologies. In light of this, the current undertaking aims to further the objectives of “Our Sea of Islands” by reframing its arguments using the vocabulary of a school of thought that can be traced from Immanuel Kant, via Hegel, to the Frankfurt scholar, Theodor Adorno. The aim is to see if we, as people of Oceania, can arrive at a more appropriate articulation of ourselves using the grammar embedded within Western philosophical discourses. As such, the paper is not an audit, given the passage of time, of what is dead or still relevant in “Our Sea of Islands” but simply attempts at a renaissance of Oceanic thinking, given that paper.

Thinking Oceania

Oceanic thought, following from the distinctions between the ‘Pacific Islands’ and ‘Oceania’ made by Hau'ofa, is a thinking generated by ourselves about us (Hau'ofa, 1993: 8). It is thinking that generates self-reflection on a social reality that encompasses the totality of our existence. Included in such reflections are the concrete experiences, both individual and collective, of our people in the region and beyond.

An obvious theme from “Our Sea of Islands” is the way in which the notion of the ‘Pacific Islands’ is problematised as the heady bromide of a motley crew of spin-doctors in various hues and garbs. Whether as discoverers, colonialists, scholars, developmentalists or bounty hunters, all of them have only one aim – the complete mastery of their object of study. It is no wonder then, the argument continues, that we as Pacific Islanders have been on the wrong end of an objectification process, given that knowledge of our region stemmed from the dynamics of conquest, domination and profit-making. This virulent strand of analysis became, over time, the mainstay of a ‘cult of facts’ that form the basis of a false essentialism generated by others on who we are.

Recalling the rich tapestry of adjectives that Hau'ofa uses to weave together the deplorable ways in which our ways of knowing have been carefully calibrated, one cannot help but call to mind a similar scholarship that maps out the disingenuous ways in which a once proud people has been suppressed and subsequently demonised (Said, 1978). The affinities are unnerving. In fact, the dynamic of disempowerment that results in the misrepresentation of the Orient seems to be the same imperative propelling discourse on the ‘Pacific Islands’. For instance, both accounts highlight the asymmetrical relationships between the Occident and the people of the two respective regions. Both underline the emphasis on our *differences*, seen in the respective representations of us. As a consequence, both give us an identity that results from a specific ‘framing’ process undergirded by the assumption that we are a ‘discovered’ people. The Pacific Islands, in this way, becomes the *exotic other* for the experts: that is, a region that encompasses a number of small islands with enthralling cultural practices. The region is there, *tabula rasa*, for researchers to register their lasting imprints; a place yet to be understood; a region where myths and fantasy swirl easily within the same orbit as science and rational understanding, creating, in the process, a messy cacophony of views from its own people.

However, there is an element of truth in this otherwise blatantly pseudo account. That is why, even within Oceania, the narrative finds a place easily in the repertoire of popular expressions about us. The melodious humming of the sea, swaying palm trees, moonlit skies, laughter and despondency, warriors and maidens, gyrating bodies and shimmering beaches are all tied up with the ways in which we have come to understand and define ourselves to others. Our *meke* (traditional dances), for instance, can be vehicles for transposing oneself to a place of cascading rhythms playing to an ancient beat. Such components, arguably, form a more wholesome picture of who we are. Yet the most important factor uniting all these constitutive elements of representation — our people — is nowhere to be found. The void that their absence creates in popular representations is simply shrouded by an anthropologically driven ‘cult of facts’ as if facts are sufficient on their own to authentically portray the region and its people. Oceanic people, far from being architects, are consequently deemed to be appendages of their exotic environs. If their presence is acknowledged then it is, most popularly, as passive beings brought in to re-enact the embellished mental imageries that transform our own conception of who we are into a mystical entity worthy of tourist dollars. This is what Hau’ofa has in mind when he notes that the use of ‘Pacific Islands’ as a signifier emphasises our isolation and our smallness, little dots that are always in danger of being engulfed by the sea (1993: 7).

Given the above, the problematic nature of the idea of ‘Pacific Studies’ as a discourse on and about the Pacific Islands becomes apparent. Like *Orientalism*, ‘Pacific Studies’ would continue to perpetuate a thought system that has clearly outlived its use-by date. It would retain the echoing whispers of our disillusionment, for our children, long after we are gone. It would connote knowledge about us from people whose only interest in studying our region is to master us.⁴ Important career choices are made, discredited and resurrected out of these machinations. Such knowledge would reaffirm the hegemonic view that has compartmentalised us into little enclaves, floating in a vast impersonal ocean, with concomitant implications as to how this knowledge affects the way we see ourselves. Instead of being the uniting factor that Hau’ofa intends, the sea becomes a wedge, separating our communities, asserting our smallness to and isolation from each other as well as our distance from the metropolitan centres of power.

Epeli Hau’ofa espouses nothing short of a paradigm shift to counter this prevailing view about us. By shifting the semiotic register, he urges us to alter our conception of the region from ‘islands in a far sea’ to one that is more in line with the way we have historically understood ourselves: as ‘a sea of islands’ (Hau’ofa, 1993: 7). This paradigmatic move conjures up bigness, continuity and, importantly for us, hope. In short, we need to clear our minds of a form of neurosis that limits our ability to see the truth about ourselves, by cleansing and immersing our consciousness in the sea. The notion of Pacific Studies thus, from an Oceanic viewpoint, is indeed problematic — a shadowy discourse of subterfuge whose primary objective seems designed to keep us adrift forever in isolated little shells.

Hau’ofa is not alone in arguing for a shift in our perceptions of ourselves. David Gegeo, in an insightful essay, posits the need to dehegemonise those Western categories of knowing that are in our minds if we are to complete the process of political liberation from all forms of

⁴ The intertwining of knowledge and power complexes are a common feature of post-Nietzschean thinkers such as Michel Foucault.

imperial yoke (Gegeo, 2001: 181). For him, cognitive categories generated from outside have the effect of mental blinkers by misidentifying what is really important to us and blinding us to our own concrete realities (ibid). Others have also noted that our survival as Oceanic people has always rested on our ability to 'absorb' new environments and adapt appropriately. The Tongan poet, Konai Helu, advances the position that, in lieu of our historical trajectories, *hybridity* becomes an inevitable part of what it means to be from Oceania (Thaman, 2003). The concept of hybridity has not gone unnoticed by Huffer and Qalo (2004), who contend that current Oceanic signifiers are necessarily forged out of global considerations and local sensibilities. This mental flexibility, coupled with cognitive acuity, provides a point of convergence among Oceanic scholars as to the reason behind our seemingly ingrained ability to make ourselves at home in various climes. What they mean is that, we, as people of Oceania, are fated, in light of our historical past, to simultaneously think *with* and *through* western epistemological categories in order to articulate who we are. Yet given our own colonial histories and the consequent subjugation of our customary ways and being, the notion of hybridity can gloss over the dichotomy in our knowledge systems.

Be that as it may, the primary thread that binds these authors is rendered apparent by their insistence that any understanding of the region has to follow carefully from the contexts under consideration. That is, templates of cognition have to be generated from within. Yet this notion of 'within' is already, because of our history, an amalgam of understanding generated by the mediation of inside/outside standpoints. Our hybridised nature precludes an either/or position. The concept of a 'Glocal' episteme propounded by Huffer and Qalo precisely captures this Oceanic sensitivity as it delineates how *thought* dialectically mediates between the *universal* and the *particular* in signification processes (ibid: 107).

For Hau'ofa, the 'Pacific Islands' as understood today is a product of categorical undertakings whose conceptual roots do not find easy footholds in Oceanic epistemology. But as the categories are a part of our thought processes, any attempt at an articulation of who we are must consider not only the issue of an insider/outsider standpoint but also grapple with the problem of conceptual thought itself. To say this is not to suggest the jettisoning of all concepts that have hitherto rendered us 'understandable' to the rest of the world. The hybridised nature of our being and knowing precludes this move. What we must try and tackle instead is the objectification that accompanies this way of understanding.

To this extent what I have in mind, therefore, is quite circumspect. I am proposing a new kind of thinking that utilises 'universal' concepts yet at the same time debars these concepts from 'swallowing' their own subject matter. This will allow us to grapple effectively with prevailing views about us that, if not curtailed, will form an inalienable part of our future. The new orientation has to be in the form of a critique of dominant epistemological categories that have hitherto marginalised us. In other words, one has to approach conceptual understanding in a different way. It is not a new path, since the dimensions of this process are embedded in the cognitive matrices of hybridity as outlined by the Oceanic writers above. As a first step towards this new orientation the material has to be brought to bear on the concept in a qualitatively different way. This is what is being meant by *constellative thinking*.⁵

⁵ To be sure, both conceptual as well as constellative thinking are propelled by the self-reflection of the subject in its quest to conceive social reality. How this understanding comes about is what sets the two apart.

Incorporating constellative thinking into Pacific Studies does not mean that we want to do away with conceptual categories that undergird the discourse. That would be naïve, if not counterproductive. Our objective is not to jettison Pacific Studies but to transform the conceptual thinking that lends it its force of analysis — to sensitise this tool of representation to our *concrete* particularities, to the ocean in us. In so doing, this attempt will be, at the same time, a critique against prevailing attitudes about us. The ultimate aim, of course, is to transform ‘Pacific Islands’ into ‘Oceania’ with the positive concomitant implications that come with this semiotic shift. Clearly we cannot take refuge behind a facade of being exotic and expect to be taken seriously. We need to wade out or, better still, paddle our canoes into the deep blue to join and mingle with mainstream thought. Furthermore, we need to do so by mastering the vocabulary that will facilitate our aim *not* to be viewed as little ‘dots’ adrift in the ocean while waiting for others to come to our aid. Our self-respect is at stake.

In the true spirit of the epistemological interchanges captured in the essence of *hybridity* itself, this paper, in attempting to further the objectives of “Our Sea of Islands”, will elucidate the imperatives behind constellative thinking by tracing the relevant works of several authors whose thoughts have made an indelible impression on the Western philosophical landscape. The discussion, moreover will be calibrated from the cognitive lenses of the Frankfurt scholar Theodor Adorno. To begin, we need to have a clear idea of the specific conceptual dynamics of how we are disparaged.

Conceptualising ‘islands in a far sea’

Conceptual thought works on the premise of a hierarchical progression where complex concepts are generated out of a synthesis of more basic tools of representation. The process continues until a generic principal identity that arises from a unity of definitions is reached. Kant refers to this as the ‘synthetic unity of the manifold’ (Kant, 1929/1965: 152; Adorno, 1973: 162).

Yet Kant also made a distinction between our conceptual tools and their objects of representation, between things as they appear to our senses and things in-themselves. In his discussion of *noumena* and *phenomena*, Kant pointed to the epistemic separation that lies between an object (thing) and its conceptual exemplification. For him, *phenomena* are tied to our understanding of an object through its representation by the concepts that are available to us. In other words, ‘[A]pppearances, so far as they are thought as objects according to the unity of the categories, are called *phenomena*’ (Kant, 1921/1965: 265–266 [A 249]). *Noumena*, on the other hand, are the dimensions of the object that exist independently of sensibility:

that is, an object as a ‘thing-in-itself’ (ibid). Knowledge then, according to this Kantian logic, becomes the product of the mediation that occurs between a (transcendental) subject and the object that lies *within* and *outside* subjective consciousness. Yet it is from the very distinction Kant makes between things-in-themselves and our conceptual understanding of them that a new problematic concerning reliable knowledge arises. How can we be sure of the validity of our own categories of understanding? Kant himself understood the

epistemological paradox that he generated but chose to 'ignore' it by prioritising concepts, used by a transcendental subject, over their objects (Solomon, 1993: 192).

It was left to philosophers who came after Kant to overcome this difficulty. In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel constructs a dialectical method of understanding that by its own dynamics, defined by a 'determinate negation', suggests the existence of a 'residue' that is always left by the wayside in all forms of recognition (Hegel, 1910/1967: 131–145). This sediment (or *non-identity*) is then systematically eliminated by the process of determinate negation of his dialectical system.

What this essentially means is that as the 'manifold' come together in a synthetic unity, elements within them that are not conducive to the emergence of a final identity are systematically eliminated. The *non-identity*, would necessarily, by its very nature, lie outside the ambit of conceptual articulation. Hence the progression of concepts from simple to complex entails a determinate negation of *non-identity* from each concept concerned. Identity or *Being*, defined as a consensus on representation, is reached only when the *non-identity* has been totally eliminated from the evaluative process. The conceptual exemplification of the *thing*, in this way, is able to portray itself as a true representation of its object. Total knowledge becomes, in this way, the culmination of the dialectical movement of ideas to its apotheosis – *Being* or Identity (ibid: 68). In an effort to circumvent any contrary claims against the veracity of his system, Hegel then made the erroneous step of wilfully 'closing' a scheme of understanding whose legitimacy lies in eschewing closure. This is why, despite the insights of his dialectics, Hegel is still an idealist in the way he prioritises the concept over its object (ibid: 118–119).

Hau'ofa points out how the consensus that congeals around what constitutes 'Pacific Islands' is actually determined by what the '*non-identity*' of the 'Pacific Islands' should be. This determination came about as a result of the coalescing of a variety of interests emanating from disciplinary domains as well as from capital and power complexes in the region (Hau'ofa 1995: 6–10). This is the lynchpin behind any definition of our 'proper' place in the pantheon of acceptable knowledge. In our context, the *non-identity* of the Pacific Islands is associated with Oceania and all its linkages. That is, the notion of the Pacific Islands as an identity comes only at the suppression of Oceanic knowing and being. Oceania becomes wilfully suppressed in any articulation of what the Pacific Islands may entail. The image of 'islands in a far sea' emerges as a consequence.

There are seminal lessons to be learned. Foremost is the awareness that conceptual thinking is a manipulative process whose final aim lies in the domination of the object of study by its subjective counterpart. Conceptual thinking does this by suppressing anything that lies outside the conceptual gaze. Crudely put, conceptual thought is subject-centred. It 'understands' by suppressing what it cannot comprehend and hence arrogantly postulating that nothing could possibly lie outside it. Hegel noted that the 'sediment' that is often a residue of conceptual thought, striving towards identity, has a lazy or idle form of existence (Hegel, 1905: 126). That is, this 'remainder' does not have any input in the production of knowledge and thus could be negated in the quest for identity. Prevailing views that categorise Oceania, first, in three broad divisions and then, subsequently, into little polities strewn around a boundless sea, follow the Hegelian practice of rendering inconsequential what it cannot understand. We, consequently, became the victims of 'discovery'. A whole

history has been concocted about us based on what our discoverers could comprehend using their conceptual tools of understanding. To extract ourselves from this conundrum, we need to rehabilitate our current way of thinking to give voice to the *non-identity* that has been stripped away without our consent from current perceptions of us as Pacific Islanders.

Rehabilitating 'Oceania': constellative antecedents in Western philosophy

As gleaned from the Kantian distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*, the claim that conceptual categories do not completely 'capture' their objects of inquiry, as argued by correspondence theories of truth, is well entrenched in the Occidental mind set. Following Kant, Adorno posits that the object, as a rule, can never be fully comprehended or 'captured' by its concept; that there is always a 'leftover surplus', or *non-identity*, that lies 'outside' the cognitive matrix of classifying categories (Adorno, 1973: 149). Even though Kant subsequently tried to resolve the antinomy between subject and object by dissolving the concrete 'thing-in-itself' to its conceptual exemplification, Adorno came away with the certainty that the dignity of knowledge can be sustained only by emphasizing a sense of proportion regarding the respective inputs of the subject and the object in knowledge production (Adorno, 1973: 175–176). In other words, 'Identity' cannot exist without mediation. Even the *self*, in this case, becomes *self-conscious* only by relating itself to *others*. This understanding of the role of mediation in ascertaining identity is an ancient Oceanic truth as well. Given this, all forms of knowledge that lay claim to a 'total' comprehension of reality from privileged standpoints are spurious. Indeed these knowledge bases can give an account only of what Adorno sees as a 'false state of affairs' (ibid: 11).

If Kant's transcendental logic brought home, for Adorno, the realisation of the opacity of conceptual categories, then it was Hegel's dialectical method that succinctly summed up the way in which conceptual thought 'dissolves' the particularistic makeup of the object: that is, the '*non-identity*' that lies beyond any form of conceptualisation.

What Adorno opposes in the Hegelian cognitive schemata is the way the dialectics accord primacy to the concept at the expense of the facticity of the object. For the former, the latter accepts without problem the ensuing representation (identity) of the object as *total* in spite of being made sensitive, through the internal movement of Hegel's dialectics, to the '*non-identity*' that escapes conceptualisation. Moreover Hegel can do this only by illegitimately viewing that part of the object that falls outside the purview of conceptualisation as totally insignificant – as having an idle form of existence (Adorno, 1973: 135). In so doing, Adorno argues, the Hegelian synthetic system completely misses the point in its quest for representation, by laying emphasis on a clear law of causality arising from a hierarchical ordering of concepts.

In light of this, Adorno puts forward a thesis on Hegel's system that is at the same time an indictment on conceptual understanding in general: that is, *Being* (identity) emerges only out of an act of 'suppression' of the *non-identity*. Hegelian dialectics could arrive at *identity* only by systematically eliminating all that would not conform to its conceptual gaze. However, when interrogated by the Kantian idea of a thing-in-itself, identity becomes aware that its representation is untrue. Adorno captures this realisation by subverting Hegel's maxim in the words 'the whole is false' (Adorno, 1974: 50). In other words, Hegel's failure

lies in his overriding desire to achieve synthetic unity and as a result, he “...could not admit the untruth in the compulsion to achieve identity” (Adorno, 1973: 157).

The way out of this epistemological paradox does not lie in the wholesale abandonment of concepts. Doing that would render understanding impossible. What is needed is to fashion understanding out of a reconfiguration of the dynamics that allow concepts to (mis)identify their objects. This quest lies at the heart of constellative thought.⁶

Based on these inferences, certain things came to light for Adorno, one being that the only valid form of understanding is through a dialectical logic that is sensitised to the limits of the concept in fully representing its object of analysis. Constellative thinking must therefore eschew any form of *closure* as exemplified by the Hegelian method. To achieve constellative thinking, Adorno radically revised the in-built mechanism in Hegel’s dialectics that always ensures ‘closure’ or the emergence of a master signifier. In Adorno’s hands the Hegelian thesis of negation of the negation, leading to an affirmation or identity, becomes a determinate negation that leads to more negation (Adorno, 1973: 159–160). Here the dynamics of a new sensitivity to all objects of knowledge become obvious. That is, we need to reorganise the way we think of ourselves by dismantling the systemic rules that govern the ways in which we have been represented by others. From this, Adorno puts forward a new orientation that would arrange the constitutive elements of a certain reality in a given order without giving priority to any of the elements involved. For him, the only way to legitimately generate understanding is through a thinking that approaches its objects openly, rigorously, and on the basis of progressive knowledge [and] is also free towards its objects in the sense that it refuses to have rules prescribed on it by organised knowledge (1998: 13).

Just as a constellation is a pattern where individual stars can be rendered more recognisable, so do ideas form a matrix in which objects are given meaning. Since ideas exist only within their concepts, it stands to reason that ‘constellations’ would entail the use of concepts. However, identity is achieved by radically breaking the rules of causality that give rise to conceptual understanding. Social reality, in this way, is given meaning by a qualitatively different form of mediation between conceptual thought and its object (nature).

To grasp the impetus behind the idea of constellation and what is new in this approach, one needs to keep in mind a few things. The first is that constellations are constructed as antitheses to the way conceptual thought misrepresents its object in the process of identity formation. Secondly, this process is aimed at rectifying the abstraction that takes place in identitarian/conceptual undertakings in which the ‘*non-identity*’ is subsumed by conceptual manipulation. Thus the idea of thinking in terms of constellations seeks to reintroduce what has been glossed over in conceptual thought. It does so by eschewing the utopian speculative moment that arises out of a ‘forced’ synthesis, in both its idealist and materialist forms. It is therefore a form of dialectical consciousness that is alert to the limitation of conceptual thinking in ‘capturing’ its object. What is new is the ‘transparency’ between conceptual thought and its object (Adorno, 1973: 10 & 45). This openness will serve to sensitise both the concept and the object to what cannot be integrated in any form of mediation. Realisation of the misrepresentation that takes place in any form of conceptual

⁶ Constellations as a way of reconfiguring tools of understanding came to Adorno via the works of close colleague Walter Benjamin, who was also a member of the institute.

articulation opens up a space for a more circumspect form of engagement; as conceptual representation, mindful of its own adequacies in signification processes, becomes more respectful of what it seeks to understand.

Taken together, a clearer understanding of the relationship between constellative understanding and conceptual thought begins to emerge. Since the former seeks unification between the object and the residue of conceptual identity formations, it therefore:

Represent(s) from without what the concept has cut from within: the 'more' which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking (Adorno, 1973: 162).

The implications are worth considering. Firstly, Adorno is of the view that it is only through the deployment of a constellation of concepts that the 'power of identity' via the concept can survive without succumbing to the pseudo-representation of conceptual thought. Additionally, the constellation prevents a process whereby concepts superimpose themselves on the object of study. The concepts, instead, are made to constantly rearrange themselves around the object in ways that would allow for *meaning*, based on the interdependence of identity and its *other*, to emerge. Secondly, the idea of thinking in terms of constellations preserves the dignity of subjective thought and the object of cognition.

Transforming 'Islands in a far sea' into 'Our Sea of Islands'

As noted at the beginning of this paper, it is critical that we continue Hau'ofa's legacy, in changing the vocabulary that gives rise to our own denigration. We must transform the image of 'the Pacific Islands' into 'Oceania' with a new constitution that will see conceptual articulations about us give way to a preponderance of the concrete material of our experiences. I am not suggesting a new ontology of *Being* but a more nuanced emphasis on *subject-object* mediation.

The emphasis on bringing together appropriate concepts in a constellation, to decipher our social reality, is a critical one. The absence of any 'closure' ensures the continued dynamism of how we project ourselves into the future. Who we are and what we can be is a product of our active interpretation of a certain configuration of our 'concrete particulars' at any given point in time. Reality in this way comes not from a hermeneutic reading of texts written about us, the so-called 'cult of facts', but is the direct offspring of our active engagement in the (re)constitution as well as the subsequent interpretation of what it means to be us (Adorno, 1977: 127). This, I believe, underscores Teresia Teaiwa's insistence that any scholarship about the region must be accompanied by an overriding concern between our own people and those who dare to make us their 'objects' of study. Those who embark on such undertakings must be ready to 'open up' their frames of reference, usually attained from the cliff tops of learning, to be 'filled' and thus moulded in the process by the vagaries of lived experiences below (Teaiwa, 2001). Understanding, therefore, becomes the product of the dialectical interplay between our concrete existence and the concepts that we use to give voice to it.

One immediate implication from this is that any reconfiguring of constellations regarding Oceania will, on one hand, bring to light certain understandings about 'us' that have hitherto remained opaque or glossed over. This new dynamism avoids any totalitarian conception of us. The emphasis on a preponderance of our 'concrete particulars' in any conceptual articulation of Oceania ensures, on the other hand, that we also avoid putting our fate in a nihilistic form of understanding that comes from the perpetual interplay of free-floating signifiers. An example of this poststructuralist tendency of conjuring 'free floating signifiers' is captured neatly by Jacques Derrida (1976: 19). In other words we must continue paddling our own canoes while navigating between the Scylla of dogmatism and the Charybdis of radical relativism.

The unifying moment that generates meaning through concepts emerges *not* from a 'negation of negation' but rather from interpreting a particular configuration or constellation of constitutive elements that are associated with our knowing and being, lived out in concrete backdrops. We must not passively imbibe pre-given truths but take an active part in the formulation of any such constellations about us. Granted that representation is created in and through conceptual language, this, does not mean that the material is immaterial. It simply means that reality (matter) and its conceptual articulation through language are intertwined. We simply cannot continue to be the willing victims of 'truths' concocted up elsewhere about ourselves, because this runs in direct contradiction to our collective nature.

Constellative thinking is a shift away from the totalitarian *modus operandi* of conceptual thought towards a new cognitive orientation defined by the existence of the object itself. It leaves 'space' for new definitions and meanings while, at the same time, preventing a nihilistic form of relativism through its emphasis on the preponderance of the object of knowledge. Its form of understanding comes about from 'patterns of thought' rather than from the insistence of the hegemony of thought over its object.

Negating the preponderance of our social and historical settings, that is, the material of our existence, in any conceptual enunciation about us shifts the balance of the 'power to define' back towards the axis of conceptual thought. We are then, as a consequence, back to 'islands in a far sea', the place of our undoing.

Conclusion.

Reading Epeli Hau'ofa once again, after all these years, brings a sense of nostalgia concerning what we once were and need to be again, a proud bunch of people whose boundaries of proficiency are as expansive as the sea that is an extension of ourselves. Our survival as Oceanic people has always rested on our ability to 'absorb' new environments and adapt appropriately. That is why we have been able to inhabit diverse places in this part of the world.

Constellative thinking, in my view, helps us in coming to terms with the historicity of our being. It aids in our attempt to 'push' Pacific Islands with its one-sided emphasis on isolation, scarcity, solitude, and insignificance, to become Oceania. It allows us to assert ourselves using a cognitive template that is not vulnerable to allegations of quixotic temperaments and tendencies. It shows the untruth behind the propagation of a certain view of our region that, in turn, renders us vulnerable to the excesses of both capital and power. It takes into

account concern for the *hybridity* of being and knowing while at the same time it allows the knower to effect social change through a deliberate construction and interpretation of the concrete particulars that collectively form our social reality.

What makes constellative thought particularly appealing is its enlarged vocabulary of resistance against the whims of conceptual domination. Constellative thinking helps us to access tools to liberate ourselves from the repertoire of devices in hegemonic Western philosophic traditions. Claiming our place using these tools will reduce the patronising attitude of others that we belong to an 'exotic' or subaltern axis of representation, that we still hail from those 'islands in a far sea' and the implications that go with this attitude. Engaging through it in critiquing negative views about us is *hybridity* in the making. Never again will we have to appeal to how exotic we are to justify our place in the sun. We instead point to the flaw that is inherent in the process of knowledge production — of constitutive consciousness itself.

Professor Hau'ofa points out that our people have, throughout their history, relied on constellations to navigate their way to a better place (1993: 7). We need to do so again. Just as understanding from constellative thinking arises by charting the gridlines from which a concept, individually *and* as part of a broader configuration, illuminates its object of study, so must an understanding of Oceania begin from the continuity established by the ocean, which enfolds all its inhabitants and whose people, with the stars firmly in their sights, traverse the seas at home and beyond, living up to their name.

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